

Remembering the Civil War Through Quilting

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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April 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2018

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Abstract

Quilting was a popular pastime during the Civil War era. Relief organizations such as the United States Sanitary Commission capitalized on this fact and sent out national requests for quilts to be made to give to soldiers. The few surviving quilts help to tell the story of the people history forgot, the women on the homestead keeping the country running while the men were at war. This project cumulates in the creation of a quilt based on traditional quilt patterns from the Civil War.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank first and foremost my family. My parents John and Rosemarie, my sister Jordan, my grandparents Rich and Paula, my aunt Dawn, and all my other extended family. Thank you for all the support you have given me over the past four years and how you have never let me forget how proud you are of me. I love you all.

Thank you to the staff of the Joann Fabrics and Crafts in Muncie, Indiana where I work. You all have been amazing co workers these past eight months and thank you for putting up with me constantly asking your opinions on fabric for this project.

Thank you to my friends who, while confused why I was doing this project, were supportive nonetheless and helped me to pick out some color combinations.

And finally, thank you to Jason Powell, my thesis advisor. The start of your humanities sequence was the first honors class I ever took at Ball State. Thank you for the laughs, the crazy stories, and the kind words. They mean more to me than you will ever know.

Process Analysis

My thesis project is creating a quilt based on quilting traditions from the American Civil War. My research started with trying to figure out if a project like this was even possible to execute. I am not the most advanced quilter and know next to nothing about historical quilting practices. Luckily the Internet is a very valuable resource that provided me with the reassurance that a project such as this could be done.

While the Internet may be a valuable resource, it sometimes does not offer much in terms of specifics. I was able to read about the history of quilting in the USA and look at some common patterns used in quilts over the years but I was not finding the information I needed in terms of specific blocks from the Civil War. This led me to researching quilting pattern books that could potentially help me. I work at a fabric and craft store and bought one of the books they had on Civil War quilts, which helped to jump-start my collection of quilt blocks to choose from. The book that I bought was by an author that had a whole series of books about quilting during the Civil War. I was able to track down some of the other books online, which gave me an incredible amount of information that I could not have found otherwise.

I then started to sort through the blocks included in the books. Some of the more popular or famous blocks were featured in multiple books and I put those at the top of my list for blocks that I wanted to include. This gave me a short list of blocks but before I chose more I needed to decide what size I wanted the quilt to be and how many blocks I wanted to do. I researched the average sizes of quilts during the Civil War era and figured out how many of my desired size of blocks it would

take to make the quilt approximately that size. I then cross-referenced the books I had to choose the remaining blocks for my quilt. I chose the blocks based on their meanings, level of difficulty in constructing, and their general appearance.

After I chose the blocks I wanted, I needed to get fabric to construct the blocks. I wanted to be as traditional as possible with the time period, which meant using all natural fabrics because synthetic fabrics such as polyester and polyester blends would not have been available. The biggest challenge with this was having to buy all new cotton thread because all I had was all-purpose thread made from polyester. Some of the blocks had specific fabric colors or patterns that I needed but others were up to interpretation. I picked the colors and patterns based on common themes I saw from the sample blocks in the books, and also colors I just thought would look nice together. I did not buy fabric for each individual block; I bought many different colors and patterns in half yard pieces and decided that the final decision on what fabric would be included in the blocks would be made when I was actually sewing them together.

With fabric for the blocks bought, actually constructing the blocks could begin. I originally thought I was going to cut all the pieces out and then do all the sewing. However, once I cut out all the pieces for two of the blocks I realized that I did not want all these small pieces of fabric floating around and that it was going to be a bit of a pain to keep everything organized. This led me to switching to cutting out the pieces, sewing the block together, and then moving onto the next block. Some of the block patterns came with instructions on how to piece and sew the blocks

together but others just said how big the fabric pieces needed to be, which made sewing some of the blocks a bit of a challenge.

Once the blocks were sewn together, I ironed all the blocks to make sure all the seams lay flat, and then sometimes cut them to the desired size if the blocks came out a bit bigger or slightly lop-sided. After the blocks were completely done I started sewing them together to make the front panel of the quilt. The back panel was then laid out with the right side facing down and the batting placed on top. The front panel was then laid onto the batting with the front side facing up. The front and back panel then had to be secured to the batting, which once again, I made sure was natural cotton and not polyester. The raw edges of the quilt were then bound together.

This research process was different then what I am used to. I am a biology major and when writing research papers or lab reports I can usually find the information I need on sites such as Google Scholar. However with this project I had to actually go out and find the information in books, which I honestly do not think I have done since high school. That, however, probably has more to do with the changing landscape of information access in society than it does with my research process. The information was still in a different format than I am used to. Scientific articles usually follow a specific format and the information for the quilt did not follow that format, which was a little jarring for me at first and took some time to get used to again.

In terms of challenges I faced while doing this project, other than format of the information, I did find it difficult to put some of the pieces together. As stated

before, I am not a professional quilter and how some of the pieces came together was a bit of a challenge to figure out. The biggest obstacle I faced while doing this project though was when the sewing machine, which my aunt gave me back when I was in middle school, broke. The timing was off which means the bobbin was not moving in time with the top thread. With the money I would have had to spend to fix it I could of bought a whole new and better sewing machine. So I did.

I am not sure that I learned anything new about my learning and research process while doing this project. I knew that I had a problem with procrastination, which definitely reared its ugly head during this process. It took me a while to actually get started sewing because it just seemed like a huge amount of work that seemed impossible to tackle and I did not know where to start. Once I did get started however it was became easier and easier to work on it because I felt that I had a better handle on what I was doing. I have almost completely taken over the living room of my apartment with all my sewing supplies, which I am almost certain my roommate does not really appreciate. However, it does allows me to go in there after class or after work or if I have a little bit of free time and work whether its just cutting a few things or sewing three complete blocks. I also learned that I am better at sewing than I thought I was. I learned to sew when I was eleven in a home economics class and despite having done it for about ten years now I have never really considered myself a skilled sewer. Doing this project though has kind of proven to me that if I can do all this research and create a whole quilt by myself then maybe I am actually good at sewing and can create projects more complex then just square throw pillows. Maybe I am incredibly more creative then I thought I was.

For me, what this project means is a snapshot of history. I love learning obscure facts from history especially American history because the history of the country is not as long as countries in places such as Europe, meaning I heard the same historical events over and over again during my general education. I like to learn about the people and events history textbooks do not mention and I have noticed over the years that often the people who are forgotten by history are women. When learning about the Revolutionary War, the only woman's name I can remember hearing in school was Betsy Ross and how she allegedly created the country's first flag. What happened to all the other women alive during this time period? The sad truth of the matter is that women during that time period were not allowed to do much and that fact did not change much by the time the Civil War was taking place. In modern times however women are empowered more than they ever have been before. I have a voice in society and a small platform to preach on. I could not think of a better way to honor the strong women who came before me then by sharing their stories so that they may live on.

Quilting and sewing are traditionally considered women's work meaning that older quilts can tell the story of a woman while my history textbook tells the story of a man/soldier. I also think it is unique in modern times because sewing and quilting are not as popular as they once were and not many people know how. I do know how and I am using my skills to bring to light the stories of the women of the Civil War because without my project and people like the author of the books I got my information from also making quilts like mine, these stories would essentially be lost forever.

Artist Statement

My thesis project is centered on creating a quilt using influences from the Civil War era. The project was inspired by the work of the United States Sanitary Commission. The USSC was a national organization designed to do those things that the government could not. Henry W. Bellows was the president of the Women's Central Association of Relief in New York. He and the other volunteers of the organization recognized that the government did not have the funds or supplies to adequately support the troops. He then went to Washington DC where he met with the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron. The two of them then drew up a plan for a relief organization on the national level. President Lincoln approved this organization on June 13th 1861-approximately two months after the start of the Civil War-that would eventually become the United States Sanitary Commission. The USSC was the only civilian run organization that was recognized by Washington DC, even though they received almost no financial assistance from the government. They were primarily subsidized through donations and fundraising efforts (Thompson 2013).

The USSC primarily provided medical assistance to soldiers through their branches in major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. These branches were typically run by women volunteers who gathered supplies to run the hospitals the USSC had put together, and they also put together care packages to give to the soldiers (Thompson 2013). One thing that was commonly put into the care packages and given to wounded soldiers were quilts. The USSC put out a national call for quilts around seven feet long and four feet wide, the average size of

a soldier's cot. The women volunteers of the USSC recognized that women on the home front were desperate for a way to support the war effort but who could not leave their homes due to family and domestic responsibilities. By making these quilts, these women could feel included in the war efforts and could also provide comfort to soldiers that were miles away from home. The quilts were made from cheap and accessible materials such as worn out clothing and chicken feed bags. They were quickly sewn together and were not made to last (Brackman 1997). This means that not many of the quilts survived to modern times. Out of the estimated 125,000 quilts that the USSC distributed to soldiers, twelve quilts still exist today (Brackman 2012).

The USSC was an organization that existed for the Union during the Civil War. The Confederacy unfortunately did not have the money or means to have a national relief organization. Southern women did make quilts but quilting was not anywhere near as popular of a pastime as it was in the North. This was primarily due to the cost of materials. A bolt (approximately eight yards) of regular cotton calico fabric cost around four dollars in the South during the height of the Civil War. Adjusted for inflation, that would be the same as spending \$115 on a bolt of fabric today (Thompson 2013).

The USSC was disbanded on July 4th 1865 after collecting almost five million dollars in donations and fifteen million dollars worth of supplies. The impact of the organization lives on today, however, in the form of relief organizations such as the American Red Cross. The founder of the Red Cross, Clara Burton, worked as a nurse

for the USSC during the Civil War, which is where she first got the inspiration to start some sort of relief organization in the United States (Thompson 2013).

My quilt is approximately seven feet long and four feet wide. It consists of 28 blocks that are twelve inches long by twelve inches wide. Some of the patterns come directly from patterns from the Civil War era while others were created later to symbolize various themes of the time period. Here I will explain some of the meanings behind the blocks and why I chose to include them in the quilt:

Kansas Troubles

This is a block from the Civil War, although the name appeared later in the 1890s. It was first published in a catalog from the Ladies Art Company, a St. Louis based pattern company. It is unknown what it was called during the war. The name was chosen, most likely, to represent the border wars happening between Kansas and Missouri during the war (Brackman 2000, Brackman 2007).



Seven Sisters

This is one of the few blocks from the Confederate side of the war. The seven stars represent the seven original states that seceded from the Union: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. The block was eventually reworked to include the other four states that seceded and to help

distinguish the block from the Union flag because it was usually paired with red and white stripes (Brackman 2000, Brackman 2012).



Sanitary Commission Nine-Patch

This was the most common patch design included in the USSC's quilts. This was because of the simplicity of its design and how quickly it could be sewn together.

The most common colors used to make this patch were various shades of brown because it was a common fabric color that could be easily obtained (Brackman 1997, Brackman 2012).



Order #11

Known as the 'Hickory Leaf' or the 'Reel' during the Civil War, this block is known to us because of Fannie Kreeger Haller. She lived in Missouri during the Civil War and at the age of ten she watched people ransack her house and ruin her mother's new quilt. To stop the violence in Kansas and Missouri, the government issued Military

Order #11, which forced four counties in Missouri along the Kansas border to evacuate. Ruby Short McKim retold Haller's story in 1929 in a newspaper column in the *Kansas City Star*. The column included the pattern from Haller's mother's quilt that was destroyed and renamed the pattern Order #11 to commemorate the violence that occurred before and after the act was instated. The newspaper pattern from 1929 asked for yellow and peach, which is why I included the colors in my final block design (Brackman 1997, Brackman 2007, Brackman 2012).



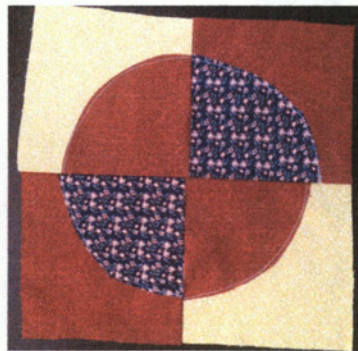
Basket in the Briars

This block was created to remember the women who carried baskets of food out after dusk to aid people in the border states. The colors included in my design are blue to signify the Union, and butternut to signify the Confederacy. Most Confederate soldiers did not wear the grey uniforms they are most often pictured in. Most wore home dyed uniforms that ended up being a tan color that was named butternut after the butternut hickory tree whose nuts were most often used in the dying process (Brackman and Menaugh 2003).



Indiana Puzzle/Rob Peter to Pay Paul

Carlie Sexton named this block in the 1920s to represent the political struggle of certain states such as Indiana. While many people supported the Union, others wanted the state to secede with the Southern states. People who opposed the Union were nicknamed Copperheads, an ode to a poisonous snake, but they took it as a compliment and started to wear pennies as jewelry because at the time pennies had the Liberty head on them (Brackman 1997, Brackman 2012).



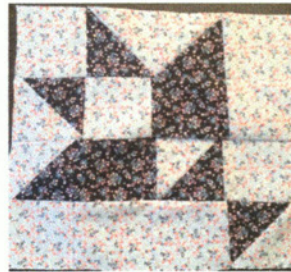
Stars Over Mitford

Mitford is a town in South Carolina. The block was created as an exercise in the placement of medium and dark fabrics. The pattern kind of looks like a star and was named to simulate stars in the night sky because the stars are there, you just cannot always see them (Martingale and Company 2017).



Market Baskets

This block has similar meaning as the 'Basket in the Briars' block. It was a common block that people made to use up fabric scraps (Martingale and Company 2017).



Log Cabin

This block is arguably the most recognized block from the Civil War era. It first appeared in the 1860s and was most likely named after Lincoln's log cabin campaign theme. The two sides are meant to contrast with light and dark colors, and red is a common color for the center square because it represents the hearth, which was considered the center of the home (Brackman 2012).



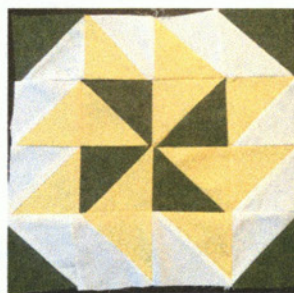
Union Shield

Having shields in quilts became popular around the turn of the 19th century, but these designs usually included an eagle carrying the shield. Lone shields started appearing in quilts during the Civil War and 1870s (Brackman 2012).



Catch Me If You Can

This block went by a different name during the Civil War era. Carrie Hall gave its modern name in 1935. People have mistaken the block as some sort of code that was used by the Underground Railroad; it is now representative of the thousands of runaway slaves before the 13th amendment abolished slavery. Earlier generations however, did not see the same symbolism (Brackman 2012).



White House

This block is a variation of one designed by Nancy Cabot in 1937. It is meant to represent the political struggle of the area around the White House because

Washington DC was located both in Maryland, a free state, and Virginia, a slave state (Brackman 2012).



Strength in Union

This block is a block designed by Nancy Cabot in 1938 based on another block most likely named 'Broken Dishes.' It represents the states that did not secede and the strength they have by sticking together (Brackman 2012).



Apple Tree

This block is based on one called 'Tree of Temptation;' created by Carrie Hall in 1935. It is meant to remind us of a Union song about Jefferson Davis. Union soldiers added lyrics to the song "John Brown's Body" that compared Davis to a sour apple and suggested a place for where he might be hung if marching Union troops happen to find him (Brackman 2012).



Calico Puzzle

Even in the North there were fabric shortages. This block was first identified in 1930 by the *Kansas City Star* and is meant to remember the fabric shortages. It uses the fabric pattern of calico which is a floral pattern commonly used in quilts and clothing of the time period (Brackman 2012).



Tea Leaf

This block is made to look like a sassafras leaf, which Confederate soldiers used to make tea during the Union blockade. The leaf is referred to in the song "Dixie" which was the unofficial Confederate anthem and a common marching song (Brackman 2012).



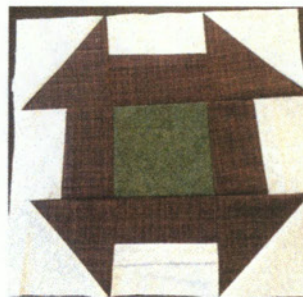
Ohio Star

This block was created to remember the African American soldiers of Oberlin, Ohio. John Brown recruited a small band of soldiers including Lewis Sheridan Leary and went on to attack a federal arsenal. Leary died after jumping into the Shenandoah while Brown was hung in 1859 for his crimes. Leary's wife Mary remarried Charles Langston and they had a son and daughter. That daughter would eventually become the mother of the famous poet, Langston Hughes (Brackman 2012).



Lincoln's Platform

This block first appeared at the end of the 19th century and goes by many names such as 'Shoo-Fly,' 'Monkey Wrench,' and 'Hole in the Barn Door.' In 1935, Carrie Hall gave it the name 'Lincoln's Platform' to commemorate Lincoln's first presidential inauguration. A newspaper by the name *Capper's Weekly* also gave it the name 'Sherman's March' around the same time period (Brackman 2012).



Pinwheel

Objects used in sewing, such as pins and needles, were scarce in the Confederacy during the war. People who vandalized homes used to break sewing machine needles knowing that it would be hard to get a replacement. Ruth Finley named this block in 1929 to honor the women who continued to sew using whatever means they could get their hands on (Brackman 2012).



The Comfort Quilt

This block was given its name by the *Kansas City Star* in 1940. It has two meanings, one being that it looked similar to the woven comforter patterns of the time period, and the other being representative of women such as Dorothea Dix. Dix worked as a nurse for soldiers at a time when it was frowned upon for women to work in the hospital. Dix and the other women that worked with her helped to break ground for women in the workplace and also helped save many soldier's lives (Brackman 2012).



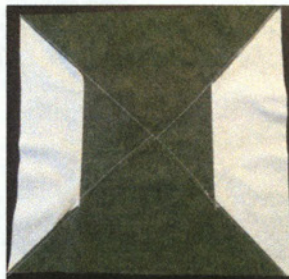
Sugar Bowl

This block was first published in 1932 in an agricultural newspaper called the *Rural New Yorker*. It is meant to look like an empty sugar bowl because of the shortage of luxury items such as sugar in the Confederacy due to the Union blockade (Brackman 2012).



Empty Spools

The Ladies' Art Company around 1900 first published a variation of this block called 'Spools.' It is meant to represent the first few months of the war when priority switched from sewing uniforms to cutting up old clothing to act as bandages for the soldiers. At the time doctors believed that packing a wound full of lint from cotton or linen was an effective treatment, which we know now not to be the case due to infection (Brackman 2012).



Twin Sisters

The Ladies' Art Company also named this block around 1900. It is meant to represent the Union and Confederacy, locked in a quarrel (Brackman 2012).



Courthouse Squares

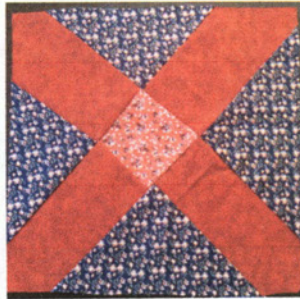
This is an older block that dates back to the 1840s. It was given this name by Carrie Hall in 1935. She named it to recall the surrender of the Confederacy in the parlor of Appomattox Court House on April 9th 1865 (Brackman 2012).



Kentucky Crossroads

This pattern was also a popular choice for quilts for the USSC. Also known simply as 'Album Quilt,' this pattern was popular in New England from 1840-1870. It was first published in *Godey's Ladies' Book* in 1859 but given no name at the time. This name comes from an early twentieth-century magazine and refers to the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in western Kentucky. Kentucky was a slave state that began the war as neutral. Troops from either side constantly invaded the state

trying to get control. In 1861 General Grant sent troops to capture Paducah, Kentucky. Paducah is located at the junction of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, which meant the Union controlled the Ohio River. Paducah remained occupied by Union soldiers throughout the rest of the war ensuring that Kentucky stayed in the Union (Brackman 2012, Brackman 2000, Martingale and Company 2017).



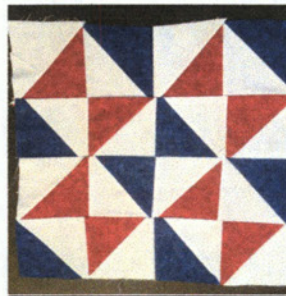
Star of the West

This is an older block also called 'Clay's Choice.' In 1929, Ruth Finley gave it its modern name. The block was meant to symbolize the Emancipation Proclamation (Brackman 2012).



Port and Starboard

Nancy Cabot named this block in 1937. It is meant to represent one of the first Northern victories when the Union captured Port Royal Sound in Sea Islands near Charleston, South Carolina (Brackman 2012).



Yankee Puzzle

Ruth Finley named this block in 1929. It was meant to convey the struggles in the North at the start of the war. They were primarily concerned with keeping the Union together, not freeing the slaves. Lincoln was even against freeing the slaves at the start of the war but eventually went on to sign the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves (Brackman 2012).



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